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DRAFT VERSION: THE POETICS OF REMOTENESS

Marc Botha

1. A fragile encounter

The sandstone formations of the Rooiberge glow a deepening ochre at sunset. In these foothills of the mighty Drakensberg mountains which bisect the South African landscape, the rocks momentarily pulsate red before the sun gives them over fully to darkness. So intense is this moment that colour becomes rhythm; form becomes pure density. These rocks themselves seem to be the source of a synaesthetic *poiesis*: they draw something new and indeterminate from the interplay of the classical elements of earth and fire. A generative echo seems to radiate from their sandstone surfaces – perhaps of the nearby sources of the Tugela and Orange rivers, the two great arteries which spring from the mountains and cut through forest and desert, surging towards the Indian Ocean in the east and the Atlantic Ocean in the west.

On the other hand, there can be no doubt that this red glow is the most banal thing: it is simply a physical phenomenon, one which happens almost daily. That the play of light and mineral should be so overwhelming, points not to the phenomenon itself, but to its apprehension by the senses. The evanescent moment at which sensory information and the sensory apparatus coincide to make a poem of sun and rock reflects a deeply human capacity – the capacity to generate sense, to make sense. The work of Jean-Luc Nancy is particularly useful in coming to terms with the relationship between the poem and sense. For Nancy, the poem never fully makes sense; it indicates an access to sense, but cannot provide this access:¹ “it has the sense of an access to a sense that is each time absent...a sense that is always still to be made.”²

Sense, for Nancy, is a complex yet agile concept. It weaves together the sensible nature of things, the fact that sense and sensation are embodied, and the processes involved in making sense. But sense also indicates an originary excess or multiplicity, which is why Nancy conceived of this complex fabric of sense as indicative of the immanence of being itself – “the structure of sense qua sense of the

¹ No “kind of poetry constitutes a means or medium of access,” but at the same time “poetry cannot be defined except by such access, and...poetry occurs only when such access occurs” (Jean-Luc Nancy, “Making Poetry,” *Multiple Arts: The Muses II*, trans. Leslie Hill (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2006), 3.

² Ibid., 4.

world.”³ The poem – “whether...a piece of writing or a natural object,”⁴ a question of process, or a moment of intense sensation – is understood in its broadest sense as a particular manifestation of the force of *poiesis*, generation, or production. In its generative aspect, the poem offers a point of contact between the sense of things and the sense of the world, between particular entities and being in general.

However, such contact should not be misconstrued as a constant point of access to the ontological sense of the world as such, and thus as an illustration, explanation, or justification for particular ontological situations. To claim the latter would be to wield, through the poem, a metonymic force capable of uncritically supplanting those things which exist neutrally, without belonging to a particular configuration of sense – what Andrew Gibson terms the *remainder*⁵ – with a type of creative totalitarianism. Returning to the reflected glow of the setting sun, the poetic essence of this moment is not some sort of sublime access to the transcendental truth of being, but points precisely to the fact that the poem is a singular and tentative point of contact between matter and sense. The poem is a fragile event – the briefest presence amidst the “chaotic sensibility”⁶ of existence. As the sun vanishes, the cliffs of the Rooiberge momentarily pulsate with an aesthetic potentiality which belongs not to the stones and the sun, not the beholder, the poet, or the painter, but to the sense of being itself.

The fragility and transience of the poetic moment is what establishes the singularity of the poem. As Attridge recognizes, such singularity does not designate an essence,⁷ but rather an “event of

³ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Sense of the World*, trans. Jeffrey S. Librett (Minneapolis and London: U of Minnesota P, 1993), 3.

⁴ Nancy, “Making Poetry,” 3.

⁵ What Gibson refers to as the remainder, characterizes those things which are irreducible to a specific event or sequence of sense, indicating the situations in which “inertia commonly prevails and is the rule. Not only must events leave a historical remainder; since events are rare, the remainder must comprise the larger part of historical experience” (Andrew Gibson, *Intermittency: The Concept of Historical Reason in Recent French Philosophy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2012), 82.

⁶ Alain Badiou, “The Subject of Art,” *The Symptom: Online Journal for Lacan.com* 6 (2005), <http://www.lacan.com/symptom6_articles/badiou.html>. 14 March 2013.

⁷ Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 67. While the present argument concurs with the insight that singularity is an event, it does not wholly agree with the assertion that this event “takes place in reception” and that “it does not occur outside the responses of those who encounter and thereby constitute it” (ibid.). For Attridge, reception is effectively a distribution of sense between writer, reader, text, and context (an argument which holds when generalized from the literary to other creative contexts), a view which finally identifies the work as a form of expression, and so is retraceable through various hermeneutic processes. Although less common, there are autopoietic and process-oriented sonic, visual and literary works which are driven by a similar degree of contingency, but a contingency which is not primarily dependent on human perception or reception (Alvin Lucier’s *I Am Sitting in a Room* and Michael Sailstorfer’s *Forst* are good examples).

singularizing”⁸ and the process of the “real-time unfolding”⁹ of the poetic work. The singular intensity of the poetic moment emerges only when, however briefly, *poiesis* itself – ordinarily inaccessible, impossibly remote – is brought into contact with the poem as immanent and concrete occurrence. However, as Nancy notes, this “occurs each and every time only once, and it has always to be done again”.¹⁰ The vocation of the poem resides in a singularity which is at once both self-sufficient and dependent on reiteration, since it indicates a “making [which is] each time an original act.”¹¹

The result is that the poem, “the thing made,”¹² always demands reiteration, not because it is incomplete but, on the contrary, because it is complete, “finished, finite.”¹³ The poetic moment is one of potentially infinite repetitions of the “perfect actuality of infinite sense,”¹⁴ which, for Nancy, is the closest the poem comes to an identity as such. Every sunset contains the potentiality of the poem, but whether or not it achieves its singular, transient coherence, it remains entirely contingent. Radical poetic work must occur with each performance if the poem is consistently to make poetic sense. As Giorgio Agamben perceptively recognizes, there must be every chance that a particular occurrence not take place in order for its potential to remain charged in relation to the future.¹⁵ The poem must remain a radically contingent phenomenon for the singularity of its reiteration to bridge the distance between the uncharged remainder and the discharged detritus¹⁶ of the everyday on the one hand, and the charged but remote force of *poiesis* on the other.

2. Poetry from and against the void

The specific location to which the opening refers, is reached by a fairly long and difficult ascent, criss-crossing a mountain stream which winds its way through dense but passable groves of thorn trees. Passing a series of small waterfalls and pools, it is necessary to traverse a large cavern – at least twenty metres across and ten metres deep, its ceiling tapering from some ten metres at its opening, to two

⁸ Ibid., 64.

⁹ Ibid., 71.

¹⁰ Nancy, “Making Poetry,” 6. This claim might be instructively elaborated by comparing it to Heidegger’s displacement of poetic work from mimetic particularity to singular essence (Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Alfred Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 37.

¹¹ Nancy, “Making Poetry,” 7.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Giorgio Agamben, “On Potentiality,” *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1999), 182-3.

¹⁶ See Gibson, *Intermittency*, 37.

metres at its rear – to reach a long, narrow plateau. This plateau comes to a sudden halt, and drops into a wide gorge, on the opposite side of which is a massive cave-dotted cliff, a cliff which radiates its own singular golden poetry at dusk.

There is something profoundly fragile in this landscape. Its spectacularly radiant sandstone fades to darkness almost too quickly for the poem to be recognized as such. This is a landscape more susceptible than most to erosion and to a progressive dissolution of the very substance which seems to harbour such poetic potential. Yet, in a significant sense, the negation of this material coherence suggests the dialectic structure of *poiesis* itself. The forces of compaction and torsion which determine the densities of different strata of rock, positing form by actively shaping the planet, are the same forces which make erosion and subsequent dissolution of these forms not only possible, but inevitable. Erosion indicates a growing absence of form which symmetrically negates the emergence of form. Simultaneously, however, the caverns and caves which certain types of erosion make possible, constitute new fields of potentiality, empty but habitable spaces which have proven crucial to the evolution and survival of numerous organic species.

These superficially antithetical forces, which together produce the physical *poiesis* of a world, recall Friedrich Schlegel's contention that the poem is "continuously fluctuating between self-destruction and self-creation."¹⁷ That Schlegel's ideal poem is an autopoietic fragment which exists in absolute isolation, should be understood not as an attempt to dissociate poetry from the world as such, but rather as an attempt to distil the essence of *poiesis*.¹⁸ At the heart of this enterprise is the conviction that the forces which shape the poem and the world are co-extensive. This assertion can be traced from the project of the Jena Romantics to the later work of Heidegger which, amplified by ecocritics like Jonathan Bate, proposes "a special kind of writing, called poetry, which has the peculiar power to speak 'earth'."¹⁹ For Heidegger, in other words, as for the Jena Romantics, *poiesis* refers to a foundational, generative force;²⁰ a force capable of producing a world.

¹⁷ Friedrich Schlegel, "Athenaeum Fragment 51," *Classic and Romantic German Aesthetics*, ed. J.M. Bernstein (Cambridge: Cambridge UP), 247.

¹⁸ Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, trans. Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester (Albany: State U of New York P, 1988), 11-2.

¹⁹ Jonathan Bate, *The Song of the Earth* (Basingstoke and Oxford: Picador, 2000), 251.

²⁰ Martin Heidegger, "Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry," *Elucidation of Hölderlin's Poetry*, trans. Keith Hoeller (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2000), 60-3.

Emphasizing the Heideggerian distinction between *world* and *earth*, Bate contends that the production of a suitably hospitable world is precisely what is at stake in a contemporary ecopoetics.²¹ Heidegger's distinction between *world* and *earth* proves instructive. *World* refers to the singularly human capacity to express our situatedness in language: "[o]nly where there is language, is there world, that is, the constantly changing cycle of decision and work, of action and responsibility, but also of arbitrariness and turmoil, decay and confusion."²² *Earth*, by contrast, describes those things which exist indifferently, which have not yet been unconcealed by language, given particular valences or purposes, and redefined as part of a *world*. Poetry radicalizes the linguistic "task of making beings manifest."²³ The poem is foundational: it speaks "the essential word...[revealing] things as what they are,"²⁴ generating the conditions under which the essence of being is immanent to the senses and the intellect. Poetic essence obviates the need for distinguishing world from earth, uncovering from concealment, since in poetry existence is revealed in its nakedness.

If poetry "sings the song of the earth,"²⁵ as Bate contends, it does so not by hymning the "essential nearness of things"²⁶ – a nearness which, insofar as it remains implicitly anchored to the Heideggerian notion of dwelling within a world, habitually reflects what Kate Rigby recognizes as "the inescapability of anthropocentrism."²⁷ Rather, might it not be possible to recognize in poetry a different music – not a song, which in any event is so intimately connected to the human voice, but a different patterning of the undifferentiated noise from which being is drawn?²⁸ Such a poetry might clarify Heidegger's claim regarding the ambiguity of "poetry as a founding [gesture]."²⁹ For, while adamant that "[w]e never find the ground [of being] in the abyss,"³⁰ he is also convinced that the poem is able to ground being only because the poet "holds firm in the Nothingness."³¹ In other words, *poiesis* grounds being because its generativity exposes itself as a relation to the void. Poetry only manifests a world *ex nihilo* to the extent that it exists *contra nihilo* – against the void – as the point of minimal contact between nothingness and that which exists. This singular point, at which the essence of *poiesis* is expressed in

²¹ Bate, *Song*, 245.

²² Heidegger, "Hölderlin," 56.

²³ *Ibid.*, 55.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 59.

²⁵ Bate, *Song*, 251.

²⁶ Heidegger, "Hölderlin," 59.

²⁷ Kate Rigby, "Earth, World, Text: On the (Im)possibility of Ecopoiesis," *New Literary History*, 35 (2): 438.

²⁸ In this regard, Michel Serres notes that "[b]ackground noise may well be the ground of our being...

The background noise never ceases; it is limitless, continuous, unending, unchanging. It has itself no background, no contradictory" (Michel Serres, *Genesis*, trans. Geneviève James and James Nielson (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1995), 13.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 60.

³⁰ Heidegger, "Hölderlin," 59.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 65.

terms of a minimal poetry of essences, approximates nothingness while simultaneously resisting the pure impotentiality to which Heidegger alludes when he recognizes that “the nothing itself nihilates.”³²

3. Patterning a different cosmos

In this way, the poem offers itself in oblique testimony to the radical, productive tension which prevails between existence and non-existence.³³ In the midst of this tension, the truth of existence appears to be nothing other than facticity at its most simple: poetry “brings about the truth vicariously”³⁴ because it generates a world in the radical manner of its testimony to the facticity of existence, and to the facticity of singular patterns within this existence. The primary intuition of poetry is that something exists rather than nothing,³⁵ and it is this confrontation of being with non-being³⁶ which promises a *poiesis* liberated from its historically anthropocentric moorings.

Directed towards a more encompassing understanding of *oikos* or dwelling, a contemporary ecopoetics promises to revise its understanding of the world-making capacity of the poem in a manner which moves beyond the Heideggerian segregation of world from earth. This recognition informs both Timothy Morton’s reconsideration of ecology in terms of a “mesh without center or edge,”³⁷ and Mick Smith’s deployment of the term *epharmosis* to describe the “co-appearance in/as the world”³⁸ a provisional community composed of entities,³⁹ constitutively open to constant change, and often “with little or nothing in common.”⁴⁰

A critical reassessment of the relation between *poiesis* and *world* calls into question not only the implicit anthropocentrism of understanding the world as *oikos* or dwelling-place, but also the vitalist

³² Martin Heidegger, “What is Metaphysics?,” *Basic Writings: Nine Essays, plus, the Introduction of Being and Time*, ed. and trans. David Farrell Krell (London: Routledge, 1978), 103. It is worth mentioning that Nancy’s phrase, “*nothing ...growing as something*” (Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Creation of the World, or Globalization*, trans. Francois Raffoul and David Pettigrew (Albany, State U of New York P, 2007), 51), which is discussed below, might be viewed as an interpretation of this, amongst Heidegger’s most cryptic phrases, “the nothing itself nihilates.”

³³ See Agamben, “On Potentiality,” 179-182.

³⁴ Heidegger, “Hölderlin,” 65.

³⁵ Agamben, “On Potentiality,” 183.

³⁶ See Mick Smith, *Against Ecological Sovereignty: Ethics, Biopolitics, and Saving the Natural World* (Minneapolis and London: U of Minnesota P, 2011), 209-10.

³⁷ Timothy Morton, “Coexistence and Coexistents: Ecology without a World,” *Ecocritical Theory: New European Approaches*, ed. Axel Goodbody and Kate Rigby (Charlottesville and London: U of Virginia P, 2011), 169 (168-80).

³⁸ Mick Smith, “Epharmosis: Jean-Luc Nancy and the Political Oecology of Creation,” *Environmental Ethics*, 32.4 (2010): 403.

³⁹ Such elements might include animate and inanimate entities, but, equally, more abstract entities, physical phenomena and processes.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

or biocentric models of the world as an autopoietic, living entity.⁴¹ The poetic generation of a world undoubtedly involves an ongoing interaction between a variable number of entities and processes, in which case every judgement as to the nature or state of the world is merely provisional. The world is liable to expand in unexpected ways, and to be acted upon by forces radically external to it. Consequently, to present the world as a *place* proves inadequate. Instead, it becomes necessary to imagine a different sort of world: a world which is not defined as a proper place; a world which is immanent yet cannot be reduced to presence; a world which is thoroughly materialist yet not limited by physical matter; a world of contingent coherence yet which cannot be grasped in terms of unity, no matter how contingently or fleetingly.

The present argument holds that any conception of the world as limited to or by *topoi* and *topology* – a conviction common to most species of anthropocentrism, biocentrism, ecocentrism and geocentrism – is insufficient to the task of coming to grips with *poiesis* as a truly radical world-making force. Finally, *poiesis* describes not only the production of new entities and new relations between entities, but also the force from which the possibility of entities and relations is drawn in the first place. At its most radical, *poiesis* is encountered as potentiality itself. What, then, of the poem as an entity, and specifically as an entity which habitually makes reference to specific places, or which is inextricable from its physical location, as in the case of Schaaplaats? How might our understanding of what constitutes a world mediate between the potentiality of *poiesis* and the actuality of the poem, and, conversely, how might the relation between *poiesis* and poem assist us in understanding the world?

The geophilosophy of Deleuze and Guatarri addresses precisely this problem when, interrogating the relationship between transcendental concept and immanent figure, the philosophers identify the sort of encounter⁴² capable of mediating between the two: “[t]hinking...implies a projection of the transcendent on the plane of immanence.”⁴³ Poetic thinking, then, acts to instantiate a sort of *poiesence*⁴⁴ – a situation in which the transcendental potentiality of poetry as generative force and the immanence of the instantiated poem encounter one another in the world-making activity of *poiesis*. It is clear that a poetics adequate to this demanding task must exceed the ecopoetics which

⁴¹ Smith’s criticism of this view is concise and persuasive (*Against Ecological Sovereignty*, 195-8).

⁴² Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guatarri, *What Is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchill (London and New York: Verso, 1994), 93.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁴⁴ As a conjunction of *poiesis* and *essence*, the term *poiesence* is offered here to address the force of generativity simultaneously in its radical and anarchic dimensions; a force which is at once processual and substantial, and descriptive of the manner in which a new entity comes into being out of and against non-existence, and, arising thus, also coming to itself as the poem at its most minimal and at its most autonomous.

Bate identifies in his engagement with Heidegger. Yet to imagine as the predicate of *poiesis*, a world entirely devoid of notions of *oikos* and *topos*, of dwelling and of place, is to abandon the notion of *world* entirely. The challenge which confronts a contemporary reassessment of *poiesis* is henceforth one of extending the poetic configuration of a world to one which is simultaneously atopian and immanent, contingently stable yet constitutively incomplete. The manifestation of *poiesis* at its most radical – the poem, at once proximate to yet remote from the void; without a proper place, yet productive of a world which exceeds the grasp of ecocritical and geocritical topologies – demands the formulation of a *cosmopoetics*.

Cosmos, as conceived in the present work, constitutes a generic space within which every possible world exists. In one sense, such a cosmos is atopian – it does not constitute a proper or stable place as such – but for this very reason it is also universal – it belongs to every possible entity, to every possible world, as the generic field of their compossibility.⁴⁵ A cosmos is a world made of making: responsive, adaptive and generative; irreducibly multiple, open, subject to expansion and contraction; contingent and provisional, yet not without definition or stability. In a passage to which Smith draws careful attention,⁴⁶ Nancy argues that such a cosmos – a world made of making, or created of creating – is “created from nothing;”⁴⁷ not in the sense that it suddenly emerges from the void, but in the sense that creation as a *force*, reveals itself to be “*nothing ...growing as something*.”⁴⁸ This force of world-making, which Nancy conceives in terms of a negative autopoeisis⁴⁹ and Smith in terms of *epharmosis*,⁵⁰ corresponds loosely to what is intended in the present piece by *radical poiesis* which, being drawn from and against the void, instantiates at an ephemeral but charged point, the force of generation *ex nihilo* and the poem which is generated.⁵¹

In this light, the poem, which Nancy defines precisely as “the thing made of making itself,”⁵² is the contingent localization of a pattern within the unpatterned cosmos. Cosmopoetics, defined minimally, thus describes the poetic patterning of the world *qua* cosmos, and the poetry of a cosmopoetics takes on the auto-generative task of presenting the world from which it simultaneously emerges. As

⁴⁵ Compossibility describes the situation in which apparent contradictories are able to co-exist without eliminating their distinctiveness, and is taken up in greater detail below.

⁴⁶ See Smith, *Against Ecological Sovereignty*, 211-214.

⁴⁷ Nancy, *Creation*, 51.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ “In creation, a growth grows from nothing and this nothing takes care of itself, cultivates its growth” (ibid).

⁵⁰ Smith, “Epharmosis,” 404.

⁵¹ In this sense, the poem instantiates that to which Nancy refers when he claims that “the *ex nihilo* is the genuine formulation of a radical materialism that is to say, precisely without roots” (ibid). See Nancy, *Creation*, 59; Smith, *Against Ecological Sovereignty*, 213-4.

⁵² Nancy, “Making Poetry,” 8

envisioned here, cosmopoetics is the aesthetic elaboration of the cosmopolitics which Isabelle Stengers develops, and which Bruno Latour describes as combining the “strongest meaning of cosmos and the strongest meaning of politics”⁵³:

[T]he strength of one element checks any dulling in the strength of the other. The presence of cosmos in cosmopolitics resists the tendency of politics to mean the give-and-take in an exclusive human club. The presence of politics in cosmopolitics resists the tendency of cosmos to mean a finite list of entities that must be taken into account. Cosmos protects against the premature closure of politics, and politics against the premature closure of cosmos.⁵⁴

Might similar checks apply to a cosmopoetics? In this case, the cosmos in cosmopoetics would resist any tendency of the poem towards absolute aesthetic self-containment or an eschewal of the material reality which precedes its advent.⁵⁵ The corollary is that the poetics in cosmopoetics would resist the reduction of the cosmos to a static position precisely to the extent that *poiesis* describes a field of radical potentiality and generativity capable of maintaining itself in an openness to novelty. Cosmopoetics describes the structures and patterns of a poetic world-in-formation, as well as the form of a worldly poetry.

4. Poem and pattern

If this is indeed the case, then the effectiveness of poetry is as much derived from these forces of formation, of making and unmaking, as it is from the media and forms through which poetic experience is communicated. Beyond analogy or homology, beyond seeming and structure, it is the productive force of structuration – of positing structure from and against the void – which allows us to recognize sonnets and sunsets as equally reflective of *poiesis*. To approach the poem in terms of structuration rather than structure, force rather than form, reveals that the essence of *poiesis* might best be described as the force which transforms potentiality into pattern. *Poiesis* is a force of *patterning*, and, finally, poetic patterning simply means to “posit within being”⁵⁶ – to posit a

⁵³ Bruno Latour, “Whose Cosmos, Which Cosmopolitics? Comments on the Peace Terms of Ulrich Beck”, *Common Knowledge*, 10.3 (2004): 454.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Such would undoubtedly be the case in a poetry constituted solely of what is described above in terms of *poïssences*.

⁵⁶ Nancy, “Making Poetry,” 7.

contingent pattern against the nothingness which grounds being, against the absolute absence proper solely to the void.

The void emerges thus as a structural principle⁵⁷ rather than as a metaphysical construct. Heidegger affirms this with respect to the work of the potter – and we may safely substitute poet here – who “takes hold of the impalpable void and brings it forth as the container [or poem],”⁵⁸ but without negating that it is the “emptiness, the void, [which] is what does the [poem’s] holding.”⁵⁹ This recognition regarding structuration lies at the heart of Badiou’s claim that the void is a point of access to being itself⁶⁰ which, of necessity, cannot itself be presented – “an unrepresentable access, thus non-access, to this access [to being].”⁶¹ The void names the unrepresentable part of every presentation,⁶² and the poem – in the sense that it constitutes a process of patterning, the presentation of something rather than nothing⁶³ – draws itself from the radical absence of the void.

The resonance with Nancy’s claim that poetry is “the negativity by which access [to the sense of the world, or being itself] makes itself what it is,”⁶⁴ is noteworthy. “Access is difficult,” Nancy continues, and “[s]omething that is difficult is something that resists our efforts to make something of it, and this is properly what makes poetry occur.”⁶⁵ Indeed, in examining Nancy’s contention that it is radical nothingness or the void which conditions the very possibility of materialism,⁶⁶ Smith maintains that “the world is created...through the constitutive acts of those singularities...[which] together, compose it, ex nihilo, from and in the face of ‘nothing’.”⁶⁷ In this light, the generative tension which defines the relation between poem, structure and void might be set out as follows: *poiesis* is the force of

⁵⁷ Very briefly, Badiou suggests that the void constitutes the principle of structuration which is necessary to every structure, or, in the set theoretical terms which define elements in terms of inclusion and exclusion, the empty set which defines the possibility of a set, but is not itself an element of any set. See Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (London and New York: Continuum, 2005), 93-4.

⁵⁸ Martin Heidegger, “The Thing,” *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 169.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ The void, according to Badiou is “the name of being” (Badiou, *Being and Event*, 56), in which case being might be defined as “multiplicity plucked from the void” (Alain Badiou, *Second Manifesto for Philosophy*, trans. Louise Burchill (Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity, 2011), 29).

⁶¹ Badiou, *Being and Event*, 56.

⁶² Ibid., 55-8.

⁶³ Here it is necessary to recall Lyotard’s suggestion that the sublime involves the radical anxiety which accompanies “[t]he possibility of nothing happening,” (Jean-Francois Lyotard, “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde”, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Cambridge: Polity, 1991), 92), a possibility which manifests in a radical existential doubt – and which poses itself in terms of the sublime uncertainty of the question “[i]s it happening?...[T]he mark of the question is ‘now,’ now like the feeling that nothing might happen: the nothingness now” (ibid.).

⁶⁴ Nancy, “Making Poetry,” 4.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Nancy, *Creation*, 59; Smith, *Against Ecological Sovereignty*, 244.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 213.

patterning which presents a positive approximation of structuration; structuration, as the generative response to our encounter with the radix of sense, is the force which actualizes non-access to the void,⁶⁸ and thus – in what is only an apparent paradox – provides access to non-presentation. This coincidence of access and non-access is precisely what is at stake in the immanence of poetic experience, and in the recognition that the poem is a fragile thing, “the thing made from making itself.”⁶⁹ As such, the poem is an exemplary instantiation of the force of *poiesis* – a singular pattern of the processes of patterning which offers a minimal point of contact with the void.

There is nothing in poetry *qua* poetry which offers predictable access to the void, to the radix of sense. The void is *radically remote* – inseparable from being, yet inaccessible in itself. At most, it can be weakly and obliquely intuited by the manner in which the poem instantiates the generative force of *poiesis*, a *poiesis* which itself offers only a minimal point of contact with the void. Remoteness describes every type of relationship with the void. As Heidegger recognizes, remoteness is neither a lack of proximity nor a spatial distance, but reflects an original severance between the void and being.⁷⁰ To approximate remoteness is impossible, but to retain a comportment or directionality with respect to that which is remote or severed from being – the void – is essential to the presentation of every object.⁷¹ Remoteness is the necessary condition for the void to be recognized but not actualized, generating what might be intuited as a general existential momentum so that “bringing-close or de-severance is always a kind of concerned Being towards what is brought close and de-severed.”⁷²

With respect to the void, remoteness reveals both an indelible distance and an “essential tendency towards closeness.”⁷³ The singular force of the poem resides in its capacity simultaneously to reflect oblique contact and barred access to the void. Poetic language reveals a double aperture to being itself: the first is the onto-poetic genesis of being, drawn from and against the void; the second is the eco-poetics of dwelling which, as Bate recognizes, indicates “either (both?) a language...that restores us to our home (*oikos*) or (and?) a melancholy recognizing that our only home (*oikos*) is language.”⁷⁴ Rigby defines the poem in its Heideggerian register as that which “lets things be in their obscure

⁶⁸ There is no simple transit between the void and existence. For something which exists to be in direct contact with the void – we might say, for it to gain full access to the void as such – would mean its annihilation. Hence it is only through a minimal quasi-access – which Nancy terms a non-access – that existence can be said to draw itself from the void, obtaining structure with respect to that which cannot be structured.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁷⁰ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1973), 138-44.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 143.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 140.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ Bate, *Song*, 281.

otherness in the very process of revealing them.”⁷⁵ Poetic presence emerges in the shadow of the void upon a tense threshold of immanence and absence. It is from this tension that the existential momentum of poetry is derived, posited as it is at the threshold upon which pattern and patterning, poem and *poiesis*, are commensurate. In this specific sense, I suggest that poetics might be defined as the invention and exploration of the empty forms from which poetic momentum arises, and which condition the possibility that the poem may be posited as a minimal and evanescent point of contact with the void, or the ground of being.

5. A Hermeneutic of the Void

If the sublime intensity of the ochre rocks at sunset seem at first to be the locus of a poetic experience of this landscape – the foothills of the Rooiberge at Schaaplaats – it is in fact the empty space beneath the rock outcrop – the space through which it is necessary to pass to the plateau and the vista of the glowing cliffs – which contains the clearest glimpse of the remote essence of *poiesis*, and the fragility of the poem through which this essence is posited. For, on the rear wall of this cavern (Figure 1) is painted a remarkable anthology of San visual poetry – generations of figures, images and symbols which testify to the inhabitation of this region by semi-nomadic groups for many hundreds of years.

Historically, anthropologists, historians and writers have used the term *Khoisan* as a generic name for the earliest indigenous inhabitants of Southern Africa. In fact, the term not only fuses two distinct cultural groups – the pastoral Khoi Khoi, whose sedentary pattern of settlement is opposed to the nomadism of the hunter-gatherer San – but it also explicitly reduces to a notion of group, tribe, people or nation, that which is, in fact, a far more complex pattern of belonging and identification. Consequently, San culture has habitually been reduced to the terms most amenable to post-Enlightenment thought. Most often, this takes the form of a terrifying dehumanization. At other times, the San are forced into a mythical, prelapsarian pastoral narrative, the heroes of an imaginary idyll which, at its most benign, echoes Diderot’s *Supplement to Bougainville’s Voyage*. Even a thinker as subtle as Bataille betrays the distinctly imperialist provenance of his thought when he attempts to identify the “germinal essence of the work of art”⁷⁶ as the event by which humanity separates itself

⁷⁵ Rigby, *Earth, World, Text*, 430.

⁷⁶ Georges Bataille, *Lascaux, or The Birth of Art*, trans. Austryn Wainhouse (Geneva: Skira, 1955), 12.

decisively from the spectre of its animality.⁷⁷ Despite hesitating before “the risky term *primitive*,”⁷⁸ Bataille’s accession to an implicitly progressivist vision of history, to his mind, justifies generalizing to the “modern ‘primitive’...a level of material civilization [which] does indeed border on [that of the] true primitive[...].”⁷⁹

Significantly, this comparison is advanced not on the basis of aesthetic, thematic or even contextual similarities, but on similarities which proceed from the stratification of value in terms of *levels* – the tiers of a normative hierarchy the foundation of which is nowhere justified or explained. It is unfortunate but unavoidable that this failure casts a considerable shadow over what, as Mick Smith’s critique of ecological sovereignty similarly recognizes, is an otherwise compelling account of radical *poiesis* in rock art as a transgressive and traumatic encounter with finitude and the void which manifests the aesthetic “game of birth and death played on stone.”⁸⁰ When Bataille subsequently rejects the comparison, it is not on the basis of its alarming insensitivity to cultural difference or historical contingency, but because Bataille fears that “if modelled after today’s retarded primitives, our idea of Lascaux Man will be faulty.”⁸¹

Unfortunately, similar claims are not unusual in many studies of rock, and nowhere are these more pronounced than in many of the colonial accounts of San rock art. In such studies the San are often misrepresented as a “helpless, simple folk who loved dancing and used their leisure in the unhurried production of ‘art’.”⁸² Seen as a bothersome but generally benign group, scattered yet culturally homogeneous, it became commonplace simply to ignore the nuanced interrelationship of San politics, religion, ecology and aesthetics. So unfamiliar is the normative western frame with this world-view, that the San are habitually mistaken for an anarchic society prone to being utterly overwhelmed and

⁷⁷ According to Bataille, it is not the invention and manipulation of tools, nor the concomitant transformation of the improvised responses dictated by necessity into the strategic labour of work, which mark the final step beyond our animality to being fully human. If existing “under the sign of work and tool-making” (ibid., 27) marks the first of “two capital events in the course of human history” (ibid), it is the second – the “making of art-objects” (ibid) which marks the “shift from the world of work to the world of play...from the roughhewn to the finished individual being” (ibid). For Bataille, it is the capacity to make without specific purpose which reflects the singularly human dimension of *poiesis* (ibid., 15, 25-6).

⁷⁸ Ibid., 25.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 38.

⁸¹ Ibid., 25.

⁸² David Lewis-Williams, *Discovering Southern African Rock Art* (Cape Town and Johannesburg: David Philip, 1990), 19. It is worth asking to what extent Bataille’s view of art, as a species of ritual play that is antithetical to the instrumental functionalism of work, might tacitly fuel this sort of interpretation. See Bataille, *Lascaux*, 35-8.

easily displaced by stronger groups, leaving only the most rudimentary trace of their inhabitation in the form of engravings and rock paintings at sites such as Schaaplaats.

Although such blatantly racist versions of San history are now defunct, and a considerable amount of archeological, anthropological and historical work is underway to rethink San culture, there still exists some disagreement as to whether such sites as Schaaplaats served primarily domestic or ritual purposes, or, perhaps, a combination of the two.⁸³ Inextricable from this distinction, is the substantial division regarding how best to analyse and understand this work. The foremost proponent of a cognitive hermeneutic approach to the study of these sites, David Lewis-Williams, criticizes the dominant practices of interpreting San rock art either as an exclusively aesthetic practice – limiting commentary to the description of decorative style and visual effect⁸⁴ – or as a mimetic narrative of the everyday.⁸⁵ Instead, Lewis-Williams suggest that the comprehension of San rock art depends on the recognition that these works are the poetic transcription of trance phenomena with a neuropsychological, and hence ubiquitous, basis.⁸⁶

San beliefs express an essential continuity between spirituality and materiality,⁸⁷ a radical alternative to the rift between the sacred and the profane which haunts western thought and experience. Thus there exist no substantial conceptual barriers to the tiered cosmology of the San, its emphasis on the exchange of energy or potency between the different levels, or its assertion that it is the “intermediate level on which human beings live and on which the lower and upper levels impinge in various ways,”⁸⁸ inhabited as they are by entities of a different, yet no less real, substance. By harnessing the vital energy or potency which moves between the physical and insubstantial states of matter, the altered consciousness associated with ritual activity is viewed as a means of controlling traffic between these levels in order to heal, ward off illness, and manipulate the elements.⁸⁹

⁸³ David Lewis-Williams, “Constructing a Cosmos: Architecture, power and domestication at Çatalhöyük,” *Journal of Social Archeology* 4:1 (2004): 32.

⁸⁴ Lewis-Williams, *Discovering*, 20-1.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 22, 25; David Lewis-Williams, *Reality and Non-Reality in San Rock Art* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1988), 1-2.

⁸⁶ “From neuropsychological research we know that San shamans would have experienced geometric entoptic phenomena because the nervous system is a human universal, and it automatically produces these forms in certain altered states” (*ibid.*, 5). Lewis-Williams emphasizes, however, that the San “seldom use hallucinogens; they enter trance by hyperventilation, rhythmic movement and music, and intense concentration” (*ibid.*, 3). Although “[t]aking hallucinogens is the most obvious way of seeing entoptic phenomena...they are also induced by rhythmic dancing and music, sensory deprivation, hyperventilation, prolonged and intense concentration, and, as many people know from experience, by migraine” (Lewis-Williams, *Discovering*, 56).

⁸⁷ Lewis-Williams, “Constructing a Cosmos,” 41.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁸⁹ See Lewis-Williams, *Reality and Non-Reality*, 7.

Untangling the semiotic knots with which the modern hermeneut of rock art is confronted, is admittedly no easy task. In this respect, Bataille's rather speculative analysis is better read in counterpoint, rather than in opposition, to the cognitive archaeological approach which informs Lewis-Williams' work. For Bataille, art is the cipher for an ontological radicalism: "it transfixes us...[making] present...all that is most remote"⁹⁰ – namely the very origin of our self-awareness of the way in which we *are human*, that "clear and burning presence"⁹¹ which manifests in terms of the "*creat[ion] out of nothing [by] which communication between individual minds begins.*"⁹² For Bataille, art *instantiates* that which for Lewis-Williams it merely *reflects*. In this light, Lewis-Williams offers a far more modest proposal: rock art offers a visual interpretation of actual ritual practice, and it is this ritual practice which, insofar as it attempts to influence the material conditions within which it takes place, intuits an oblique point of access to the generative force of being itself.

Both thinkers thus emphasize the religious provenance of a rock art which "create[s] a sensible reality whereby the ordinary world is modified in response to the desire for the extraordinary."⁹³ Bataille contends that this desire is born from a traumatic recognition of the ubiquity of death,⁹⁴ in response to which, art constitutes a generative, and hence transgressive, species of experimentation. The resultant cosmology – a world shaped by an inevitable confrontation with death – is significantly different from the cosmology which Lewis-Williams recognizes in much San rock art, and which is alluded to above. If both cosmic arrangements consist of multiple tiers – separating the material from the spiritual, the living from the dead, the human from the animal – the boundaries between these tiers are far more porous in San cosmology than in Bataille's speculative history. By treating the separation of the sacred from the profane as a universal fact,⁹⁵ Bataille reduces the role of ritual to one of transgression – the reversal of a prohibition – failing to acknowledge the many situations in which the distinction of the sacred from the profane is inapplicable. For all the subtleties of his

⁹⁰ Ibid.; Bataille, *Lascaux*, 11.

⁹¹ Ibid., 12.

⁹² Ibid., 11.

⁹³ Ibid., 34.

⁹⁴ Lascaux, 29-30; see Smith, *Against Ecological Sovereignty*, 2-3, 9-10.

⁹⁵ Bataille, *Lascaux*, 30-1. Agamben's writing on the sacred and the profane goes some way in demonstrating that Bataille's views derive from Roman juridical norms, rather than from some universal prehistory (Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Zone, 2007), 73-6.) The "special unavailability" (ibid., 73) which distinguishes the sacred is productively transgressed when "play frees and distracts humanity from the sphere of the sacred, without simply abolishing it" (ibid., 76), recalling Bataille's claim that "art, play and transgression come not singly but every time joined in defiance" (Bataille, *Lascaux*, 38).

discussion, Smith seems to miss this possibility when he suggests that Lewis-Williams' account "complicates but still supports Bataille's interpretation."⁹⁶

Returning to the Schaaplaats site, there are several groups of paintings which illustrate these cosmological and cosmopoetic subtleties with considerable force. Best preserved is a herd of Eland – the largest of the Southern African antelope, particularly closely associated with San ritual for their spiritual potency⁹⁷ – and two central groups of therionthropes. Although some scholars favour the view that these are simply mimetic figures of hunters disguised in animal masks,⁹⁸ a hermeneutic approach to San rock art insists that therionthropes be interpreted as icons of San cosmology and ritual practice – as "people blended with animal who are experiencing trance"⁹⁹ and which are "often painted...in an elongated fashion" or "bleeding [from the nose], staggering, lowering their heads, and with hair standing on end"¹⁰⁰ to indicate the somatic symptoms of their transition between different levels of being, and the poetic conflux of immaterial and material experience.

Although they are themselves interesting, the Schaaplaats therionthropes and eland are flanked by two, more enigmatic figures. Both offer considerable insight into the cosmology of the San, clarifying the generative force which moves through this work. For this is poetry in the precise sense described above: a struggle to grant form, to make, which is posited through a pattern against that which cannot be patterned – the void – in order to provide fugitive access to sense itself.

The bright red and ochre figures to the far left of the shelter (Figure 2) mediate between the abstract and the concrete, moving between pattern *qua* pattern, and pattern as the preamble to a made thing, a form, a figure. While the ochre eland to the left of this group is unambiguous, the two forms to its right are deeply ambiguous. The intensity of the gestural lines which cross each other to constitute these forms suggests a biomorphic dynamism, but certainly not one as easily reducible as Woodhouse suggests, to a "canoe-like painting"¹⁰¹ adjacent to "a human figure [that] lies on its back with one arm outstretched"¹⁰² towards an object identified as a "paddle."¹⁰³

⁹⁶ Smith, *Against Ecological Sovereignty*, 225.

⁹⁷ Lewis-Williams, "Constructing a Cosmos", 41; David Morris, Sephai Mngqolo, Geoff Blundell, Anne Holliday and Thomas Dowson, "Dismantling a Powerful Place: The Salvaging of Rock Engravings Near Warrenton, Northern Cape," *Southern African Field Archaeology* 4 (1995): 59.

⁹⁸ Bert Woodhouse, *The rock art of the Golden Gate and Clarens districts* (Rivonia: William Waterman, 2006), 58-9.

⁹⁹ Lewis-Williams, *Discovering*, 50.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 53.

¹⁰¹ Woodhouse, *Rock art of Golden Gate*, 59.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

Insisting on the mimetic aspect of rock art, threatens to miss its most forceful intuition of *poiesis* itself. While Woodhouse sees little reason to emphasize the “short strokes”¹⁰⁴ of paint around the back of the eland, these are in fact inscriptions of the entoptic phenomena which the San assert are the most sure markers within the trance state of the vital potency from which all levels of existence draw their momentum.¹⁰⁵ Perhaps not surprisingly, Bataille, makes a similar error with respect to the Lascaux site, mistaking entoptic patterns for “[c]learly gratuitous doodlings.”¹⁰⁶ In fact, entoptic phenomena describe a broad range of neuropsychological experiences connected to visual hallucination, where an abstract pattern which does not have an external source is apparent when the eyes are both closed and open.¹⁰⁷ In San rock art, the most common inscriptions of these phenomena include dots, circles, short lines, zig-zags and grids, surrounding forms and figures much as haloes might. The short strokes which emerge from the Schaaplaats ochre eland might, therefore, be understood as poetic inscriptions which seek to communicate the fact that form – the form of the eland, which is also the form of the poem – offers only a contingent means of stabilizing the poetic force which is always mediating between form and formlessness, and migrating between the different levels of existence.

The attempt to transcribe, and in the process to interpret, these entoptic phenomena, sets as its aim nothing less than the mimesis of *poiesis*. Although no mimetic technique proves equal to this radical task, these entoptic marks nonetheless reveal a valuable species of marginalia – a poetic commentary on the forms they surround, as well as a reminder of the essential remoteness of poetic experience from the absolute absence from which it draws itself through the work of positing, patterning, or *poiesis*. Thus, entoptic marks seek to inscribe that which is constitutively absent in every presentation, and to offer an oblique but persistent hermeneutic of the void. Implicitly distinguishing between the poem and the void, entoptic patterning reaches toward the heart of *poiesis*, while carefully tracing itself around the absence of structure or pattern which is here termed the void.

That poetry offers itself as an interpretation of radical absence, is closely reflected in attempts to represent the catenary curves – u- or boat-shaped – which are amongst the most pervasive entoptic phenomena. These have “a curved, flickering outside edge around a boat-shaped area of invisibility. The area of invisibility is a sort of ‘black hole’ which blots out anything in the ‘real’ world that it

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Lewis-Williams, *Discovering*, 46-8; Thomas Dowson, “Dots and Dashes: Cracking the Entoptic Code in Bushman Rock Paintings,” *South African Archaeological Society Goodwin Series* 6: 1989, 84, 91-3.

¹⁰⁶ Bataille, *Lascaux*, 35

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 56-7.

happens to cover.”¹⁰⁸ These are often the subject of a “fairly literal depiction,”¹⁰⁹ both positive and negative. With respect to the former,¹¹⁰ the mark which Woodhouse identifies as a panga or paddle in the Schaaplaats red and ochre group, might as plausibly be interpreted as a red catenary curve. Indeed, it is possible that this entire group, the clearly formed eland aside, are non-mimetic, and represent attempts to transcribe entoptic phenomena as forms in positive space. Most u-shaped entoptics are represented by negative space, delineated by the marks or forms which emerge from a radical absence of form. As such, they constitute an empty “area of transformation”¹¹¹ – the *growing nothingness* by which Nancy characterizes creation or *poiesis* – from which poetic forms are drawn,¹¹² “antelope legs and part-human, part-animal figures coming out of the area of invisibility.”¹¹³

This essentially contentless event of *poiesis*, is exemplified with some force in the second of the more cryptic figures at Schaaplaats. To the far right of the shelter, from a fissure in the face of the rock, emerge two creatures (Figure 3). Like the poetic event to which they refer, these figures are fugitive. Not only has the intensity of their colours faded, but there is evidence of entoptic dashes, and also that these paintings have had numerous incarnations,¹¹⁴ as generations of shamanic poet-painters have traced their singular pattern over this point of contact with the void, painting figure upon figure, inscribing poem upon poem.¹¹⁵ Although difficult to discern with any precision, it is likely that the forms emerging from this fissure are rain creatures¹¹⁶ – the poetic expression of hallucinatory animals encountered in the trance-state, the power of which must be controlled in order to restrain the destructive power of the rain while harnessing its generative potential.¹¹⁷

To the extent that it provides the source from which *poiesis* is transformed into pattern, the fissure represents a field of continuity between the material and the immaterial, and a poetic point of contact between sensation and sense. As approached by the poet, the fissure constitutes a singularly intense instantiation of the sublime: there is no way of telling how deep the fissure runs, or whether or not it is, in fact, an aperture to the void. In this sense, the fissure opens symbolically onto a fundamentally inaccessible field of sublime poetic potentiality: the *growing nothing* to which Nancy alludes, or that

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 57.

¹¹⁰ See ibid., 59.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 57.

¹¹² See Lewis-Williams, *Reality and Non-Reality*, 7.

¹¹³ Lewis-Williams, *Discovering*, 57.

¹¹⁴ Woodhouse, *Rock art of Golden Gate*, 59.

¹¹⁵ See Lewis-Williams, *Discovering*, 17.

¹¹⁶ Woodhouse, *Rock art of Golden Gate*, 59.

¹¹⁷ Lewis-Williams, *Reality and Non-Reality*, 15-7.

which Levinas' terms the *il y a* or the *there is* – the “impersonal, anonymous, yet inextinguishable ‘consummation’ of being, which murmurs in the depth of nothingness itself”¹¹⁸ – which, as Morton recognizes “enmeshes our being prior to any ontological notion such as ‘world’ or ‘system’.”¹¹⁹

Entoptic phenomena share with fissures and cavities the difficult remoteness which reveals how sense is present in every poetic intuition, yet inaccessible in itself – an intuition which is reflected with remarkable clarity in Lyotard's formulation of the sublime as “a sensory now...[which] cannot be presented and [yet] which remains to be presented.”¹²⁰ Sublime poetic experience is thus marked by *ekstasis* – a movement from inside to outside exemplified in the emergence of forms from the Schaaplaats fissure, but also the externalization of an inwardness or privation through a sublime encounter which has a clearly external source, as is the case with the pulsating glow of the sandstone cliffs at sunset. *Ekstasis* and remoteness coincide to the extent that they both describe the simultaneity of process and a state of externalization. In this light, it is possible to refine the central proposition of the present piece, that *poiesis* posits a pattern in relation to a radical and foundational remoteness of the poem from the void: *poiesis* is always involved in a paradoxical movement that is at once *towards* and *away from* the void. The void describes the absence proper to every situation of presence, and it is the void which marks the cultivation of nothingness from and against which sense draws its immanence. In this light, it becomes possible to say that the void indicates the intimacy of *ekstasis* – the inward-moving outwardness of sense – which marks the essence of every pattern or poem.

6. Cosmopoetic compossibilities

It is worth pausing on the similarity between *technē* – which Heidegger describes in terms of the capacity “to make something appear, within what is present”¹²¹ – and *poiesis* or “the thing made by making itself,”¹²² to recall Nancy. Their shared emphasis on generation helps to shed light on what is intended by patterning in the present argument: although *technē* involves a making not specifically tied to aesthetics in the manner of *poiesis*, poetry might nonetheless be described as the set of techniques by which *poiesis* is stabilized in terms of a pattern. Technique suggests a disposition, an

¹¹⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1978), 52.

¹¹⁹ Morton, “Coexistence and Coexistents,” 172.

¹²⁰ Lyotard, “Sublime and the Avant-Garde,” 103. For a brief sketch of the stakes which connect the sublime, judgement, creation and world-making, see Nancy, *Creation*, 59.

¹²¹ Martin Heidegger, “Building Dwelling Thinking,” *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 159.

¹²² Nancy, “Making Poetry,” 8.

availability towards some end. The disposition of the poem is towards sense, but since sense as such is unavailable, poetry is finally a disposition towards the technique which offers a brief point of contact with sense. The force which offers such contact is *poiesis*, but the *technique* which makes both poem and *poiesis* intelligible in terms of pattern and patterning, is termed *poetics*. Poetics is thus the technique by which a pattern is made of patterning.¹²³ As a technique, poetics reflects a disposition, but it is a disposition towards that which cannot be consistently presented – sense and the void – and so which discovers no *telos*. Here is a precise echo of Kant's understanding of aesthetic judgement in terms of a "purposiveness without purpose, insofar as we do not posit the causes of this form in a will and yet can grasp the explanation of its possibility only by deriving it from a will."¹²⁴

Poetic patterning derives, in the first place, from the void as a necessary rather than a voluntary condition to the presentation of sense, yet poetry can finally only be interpreted, if it is interpreted as something which is patterned with some sort of direction. It is in this precise sense that the poem announces a cosmopoetics – the production of a contingently coherent pattern capable of reflecting the ateleological understanding of a cosmos constituted of multiplicity.¹²⁵ The poem reveals "sense as a being-to"¹²⁶ – a movement *towards*, an approach *without arrival* which, recalling the coincidence of poetic remoteness and *ekstasis*, is "another way of being outside of oneself, of being to oneself as though sent, thrown, or dispatched, not having arrived, still coming."¹²⁷ Hence poetry cannot make unambiguous sense. As Agamben recognizes, the poem "suspend[s] its own end,"¹²⁸ since "the end would imply a poetic impossibility,"¹²⁹ namely, the absolute coincidence of sensible information with the sense of being.¹³⁰ This would miss that the dual vocation of the poem which establishes sense both as *telos* – "[s]ense as...terminus and as destination,"¹³¹ and as ground – "sense as principle or origin."¹³² This region of ambiguity is precisely located at the point at which the figures emerge from the fissure at Schaaplaats. To exit the void is also indirectly to locate it: the poem becomes sensible

¹²³ The proximity of three formulations central to the present work – of the *cosmos* as a world created of creating, of the *poem* as a thing made of making, and of poetics as the discernment of a pattern made of patterning – suggest how poetics is able to demonstrate the co-extensiveness of *poiesis* and *world-making* as forces generative of a *cosmos*.

¹²⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett, 1987), 65.

¹²⁵ See Timothy Morton, "Queer Ecology," *PMLA* 125.2 (2010): 277-8; Smith, "Epharmosis," 392; Smith, *Against Ecological Sovereignty*, 210-11.

¹²⁶ Jean-Luc Nancy, "The Necessity of Sense," *Multiple Arts*, 113.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 113.

¹²⁸ Giorgio Agamben, "The End of the Poem," *The End of the Poem: Studies in Poetics*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1999), 113.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

¹³⁰ *Ibid.* Also see Nancy, "Making Poetry," 4-5.

¹³¹ Nancy, "The Necessity of Sense," 114.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 114.

only at the point of multivalent contact with the void, the point at which the poem is subtracted from pure sense itself.

It is the multivalency of this point – reflecting in poetic becoming both *telos* and origin – which connects the patterning of the poem to the patterning of the world. The reconnection of poem and world recalls the type of processual ontology which Heidegger refers to as the “worlding of the world.”¹³³ The “worlding world”¹³⁴ describes the self-generative process by which the world comes into being as radical immanence. For Heidegger, worlding can be grasped neither in terms of ground and cause, nor in terms of *telos* and end.¹³⁵ Like *poiesis*, worlding is an *orientation* towards *telos* and *origin* which can only be conceptualized in the necessarily unstable terms of an immanent becoming.¹³⁶ For Heidegger the orientation or comportment of poetry is finally a return to *aletheia* – an uncovering of existential essences¹³⁷ on which basis he famously claims that “[a]ll art, as the letting happen of advent of the truth of what is, is, as such, essentially poetry.”¹³⁸

Recalling the earlier distinction of *oikos*, *geos* and *cosmos*, it is possible to recognize more clearly now why Heidegger’s ideas regarding worlding habitually lead to the conviction that poetry conveys a sense of *dwelling*, referring to the manner in which something “initiates [its] own nature”¹³⁹ in a return to its essence. The poem, for Heidegger, is a sort of homecoming, or a return to the *oikos* or dwelling of being. This understanding of *oikos* serves as the root for a type of deep ecology¹⁴⁰ identified with Heidegger’s thought, and informs a species of *ecopoetics* which, ranging across a spectrum of themes, forms and images, identifies in the worlding of the poem, a “nearing of nearness”¹⁴¹ – a de-distancing which, in Wilson’s terms, might translate with relative ease into “an active and vigilant critical as well as poetic constructivist process.”¹⁴²

¹³³ Heidegger, “The Thing,” 180.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 179-80.

¹³⁶ Processual becoming is described by numerous other Heideggerian terms in addition to worlding, including dwelling, gathering, presencing, thinging and nearing. See Heidegger, “Thinking Dwelling Being,” 147-8; Heidegger, “The Thing,” 174-7.

¹³⁷ Heidegger, “Origin of the Work of Art,” 71-2, 77-8.

¹³⁸ Ibid., 72.

¹³⁹ Heidegger, “Building, Dwelling, Thinking,” 151.

¹⁴⁰ Discussions of deep ecology most often centre on the work of Arne Naess, which constitutes one of the early sustained challenges to the anthropocentric vision of ecology, emphasizing instead a “biocentric egalitarianism” (Patrick Curry, *Environment Ethics: An Introduction* (Malden, MA and Cambridge: Polity, 2011), 105). However, its insistence on the separation of human from non-human life, and of life-forms from other entities, leaves it knotted to the problem of relative value, and hence the political economy from which it ostensibly seeks to disentangle itself.

¹⁴¹ Heidegger, “The Thing,” 180.

¹⁴² Rob Wilson, “Afterword: *Worlding* as Future Tactic,” *The Worlding Project: Doing Cultural Studies in the Era of Globalization*, ed. Rob Wilson and Christopher Leigh Connery (Santa Cruz: New Pacific Press, 2007), 212.

However, it is necessary to distinguish worlding – a universal process of becoming – from world-making, which involves the generation of a particular configuration of objects and events within this situation of becoming. The poem might be described, in this light, as a singular instance of world-making which exemplifies the immersion of being within worlding. Heidegger's interlocutors¹⁴³ are habitually divided on whether the poem actually has its *telos* and origin in *aletheia* and presence, or in the void and absence. The former easily extends to a vision of poetry as having an intrinsically *ecopoetic* disposition – a poetic or generative movement towards *oikos* or dwelling; an approach, a closing of distance, and a nearing. By contrast, judging the void as the *telos* and origin of the poem recognizes that it is remoteness, rather than dwelling, which characterizes *poiesis*. Rigby, for example, favours a “negative ecopoetics”¹⁴⁴ in which the poem demonstrates the “nonequation of word and thing, poem and place” in which case the force of the poem resides not in what is unconcealed, but in remoteness itself, in “the withholding of what is promised.”¹⁴⁵ Remoteness is the recognition that every poetic pattern is recognizable as such only because it is patterned against the absolute negation of the void. In this sense, remoteness is the marker of a radical contingency, and a sublime echo of the contingency of all existence.¹⁴⁶

Three models of poetic patterning are presented above. First, in the transfigurative encounter with the sunset, the pattern is derived from an essentially external source at the intersection of sensation and physical phenomena entirely indifferent to sensory perception. Second, the poetic pattern is derived from an internal encounter between sense and sensation, which seems to be the case with the attempt to transcribe entoptic phenomena which we encounter at the far left of the Schaaplaats site. The third explanation of poetic patterning emphasizes *poiesis* as a force of ambiguous emergence from the void, which is charged with significance precisely because the void cannot be patterned, and which is suggested by the fugitive figures which proceed from the fissure to the right of the shelter. However, understanding *poiesis* is not a question of choosing between competing explanations of poetic patterning. What is central, instead, is the *compossibility* of internally – and externally derived patterning with more ambiguous and complex emergent patterns. Such compossibility – within which

¹⁴³ Amongst these interlocutors most relevant to the present work, we might note the philosophers Levinas, Bataille, Agamben and Nancy, and the critics and theorists Bate, Rigby, Wilson and Morton.

¹⁴⁴ Rigby, “Earth, World, Text,” 437.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ See Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (London and New York: Continuum, 2008), 65.

apparent contradictories are demonstrably able to co-exist without eliminating their distinctiveness¹⁴⁷ – necessitates reformulating the *oikos* of ecopoetics in terms of the *cosmos* of cosmopoetics.

Much as Nancy recognizes that the world grows *ex nihilo*, so the present argument is that the void constitutes the ground for compossibility, recalling that compossibility is precisely what distinguishes the diversity of the *cosmos* from that which the notion of *oikos* suggests is ultimately a question of confluence. It is the void, after all, that is common to every possible structure, and so, too, to every compossible structure. In this light, while ecopoetics represents the confluence of divergent paths towards an *oikos* or dwelling, cosmopoetics envisions the situation in which the paths of a number of proximal events “extend in all directions,”¹⁴⁸ an extensionality which is unimaginable without the void as ground for a region of compossibility.

Cosmopoetics places in radical doubt the adequacy of Heidegger’s anthropocentrism to the task of understanding world-making or *poiesis*. Heidegger restricts world-making and the consequent capacity to dwell in this world, to human agents: humans form a world in which to dwell, animals merely occupy a world, while material objects, while existing in a world, are themselves fundamentally worldless.¹⁴⁹ While poetry is certainly a species of world-making, generatively mediating between sense and sensation, it is equally true that the world conditions the possibility of the poem precisely to the extent that existence – the world itself – depends on maintaining a measured but generative relationship with the void. The poem is one of these measures: inasmuch as it offers a brief point of contact with the void, the significance of this contact might as easily be understood by its corollary – that the poem only closes in order to restore a necessary distance, or the constitutive remoteness of the void.

7. Remoteness

That the contemporary sense of cosmos as the totality of existence continues to move steadily away from an implicitly geo- and anthropocentric view of an ordered existence, is reflected in the shift from

¹⁴⁷ See Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester with Charles Stivale (New York: Columbia UP, 1990), 171-2; Alain Badiou, *Conditions*, trans. Steven Corcoran (London and New York: Continuum, 2008), 23; Norman Madarasz, “Introduction,” *Manifesto for Philosophy*, Alain Badiou, trans. Norman Madarasz (Albany: State U of New York P, 1999), 19-20.

¹⁴⁸ Deleuze, *Logic*, 172.

¹⁴⁹ Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, trans. William McNeill and Nicholas Walker (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1995), 177-8.

an ecopoetics to a cosmopoetics. Defined above as the poetic patterning of the world *qua* cosmos, a cosmopoetics takes up the challenge of evading that to which Rigby seems resigned in reporting the apparent “inescapability of weak anthropocentrism.”¹⁵⁰ Cosmopoetics refers to something more than a “merely human response...to the call of nature’s self-disclosure, it *autopoiesis*”¹⁵¹ precisely to the extent that *poiesis* describes a force that moves, unbounded, across all tiers of existence. *Poiesis* is able to be patterned, to become a poem, solely because, drawn from and against the void, it is radically remote, radically indifferent, to those situations it animates.

Cosmopoetics, to the extent that it patterns itself against the void, expresses itself as a poetic of remoteness. An unexpected symmetry becomes evident between the type of remoteness which is reflected by the topological singularity of the sublime evanescence of the Rooiberg sunset, and the remoteness evident in the poetic absence marked by the fissure at Schaaplaats which symbolizes the void, and from and against which pattern and form are drawn. These demonstrate how remoteness describes a conceptual threshold between presence and absence, the same threshold upon which the sense of the world is at once immanent and yet unavailable.

However, it is necessary to keep in mind that if remoteness is an absolute condition of the void, it is relative in any specific judgement. Thus, if the Schaaplaats site and its geography speak in an exemplary manner of the remoteness at the heart of poetry itself, and the relation of this remoteness to the sense of being, they do not speak without a specific intonation.¹⁵² Resisting the dominant stress in western discourse on narratives derived from an apparently stable centre – a located, historical corpus – the narrativization of San culture remains unavoidably caught in a web of ideological sequences which fluctuate between a bucolic idealization, and a blatant trivialization. San poetics is all too easily forced to the periphery, regarded as a marginal discourse of a migratory people, the remainder¹⁵³ which lacks valency or traction. Such misprision necessitates both a hermeneutic and a poetic of San art, the former establishing an interpretive lexicon, the latter an account of poetic origin and effect. These seek to challenge the predominance of aesthetic and mimetic reductions of this art, restoring a sense of its poetic force – a force which is habitually rendered remote from the reality it plays no small part in constituting.

¹⁵⁰ Rigby, “Earth, World, Text,” 438.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Indeed, Nancy talks about a “tonics” of sense (Nancy, *The Necessity of Sense*, 114).

¹⁵³ See note 5 above.

Yet, as Heidegger remarks, “[w]hat is least remote for us in point of distance...can remain far from us...[while w]hat is incalculably far from us in point of distance can be near to us.”¹⁵⁴ Careful examination suggests that the imposition of conceptual centres in relation to which information is organized, is itself the result of an elision of physical distance and the temporal distribution of events. This conflation provides the basis from which judgements regarding relative nearness or remoteness can be determined by a quintessentially hierarchical arrangement which so often seems to have its centre projected from a location other than the one to which it is applied – a mythical centre of power and authority from which relative value is determined. The question of remoteness is eminently political, weighed against the notion of proximity and the localization and exercise of political power. The reduction of remoteness to a question of distance and proximity brings with it the sphere of normative judgements regarding belonging and non-belonging, so that the proximity of the centre also becomes a point of desire, while the periphery is to be eschewed.

The present work has sought to move decisively beyond this limited conception of remoteness as a relative measure. It argues instead that remoteness is a necessary condition for the emergence of poetry in both its structural and generative aspects, since the poem is drawn from and against the void – which is the necessary condition of structure itself. The remoteness exemplified at Schaaplaats cannot be reduced to a question of geographical remoteness – this would depend on the erroneous identification of a centre, or *oikos*, from which proximity and distance are measured – nor is its remoteness a question of history, style, rhetoric, or form as such. Rather, remoteness conditions the manner in which *poiesis* mediates between the poem – an exemplar of pattern and structure – and the void – the absence of pattern, structure, and form. As Nancy recognizes, in poetry, “[t]he selfsame thing that is both abolished and posited is the access to sense. Access is unmade as passage, process, aim, and path, as approach and approximation.”¹⁵⁵ Remoteness is thus construed as constitutive with respect to a poetic access to sense – a constructive distance between poem and void which is bridged only briefly, and only intermittently, by the force of *poiesis*.

The unpredictable urgency of poetic events is clarified in Gibson’s assertion that “intermittently the possibility of value interrupts a world without value.”¹⁵⁶ The brief point of contact with the void which *poiesis* affords, constitutes precisely such an interruption. Poetry indicates remoteness as a mark of its poetic work, even its most intimate moments, since it offers an oblique presentation of the

¹⁵⁴ Heidegger, “The Thing,” 165.

¹⁵⁵ Nancy, “Making Poetry,” 8.

¹⁵⁶ Gibson, *Intermittency*, 26.

structuring force of the void which cannot be directly presented,¹⁵⁷ yet which is always working through the poem in the dialectic terms of production and negation.¹⁵⁸ In this sense, remoteness is the condition of the poem's materialization *qua* poem, the crystallization of a fragile form which, "properly identical with itself, whether we are dealing with a piece of writing or a natural object,"¹⁵⁹ constitutes an infinite echo of a lost essence. This essence, were it to manifest, would be an absolute *poiesis* – a positing of something out of nothing, of the poem *ex nihilo*, a quasi-divine gesture which would negate the void itself. It is precisely this gesture to which Nancy is opposed in insisting that the *ex nihilo* does not mean fabricated with nothing by a particularly ingenious producer."¹⁶⁰ Instead, *poiesis* describes a radically generative force precisely to the extent that it emerges simultaneously from and against the void. It is this relational dynamic – of being *from* as well as *against* – which marks the poetics of remoteness. To instantiate being itself – to make something out of nothing – is perhaps the ultimate goal of both poem and poet, but it is one which remains irretrievably remote, and it is intensifying our apprehension of this remoteness which makes poetry invaluable still.



¹⁵⁷ Badiou, *Being and Event*, 93-5.

¹⁵⁸ Nancy, "Making Poetry," 4, 8-9.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁶⁰ Nancy, *Creation*, 51.

Figure 1

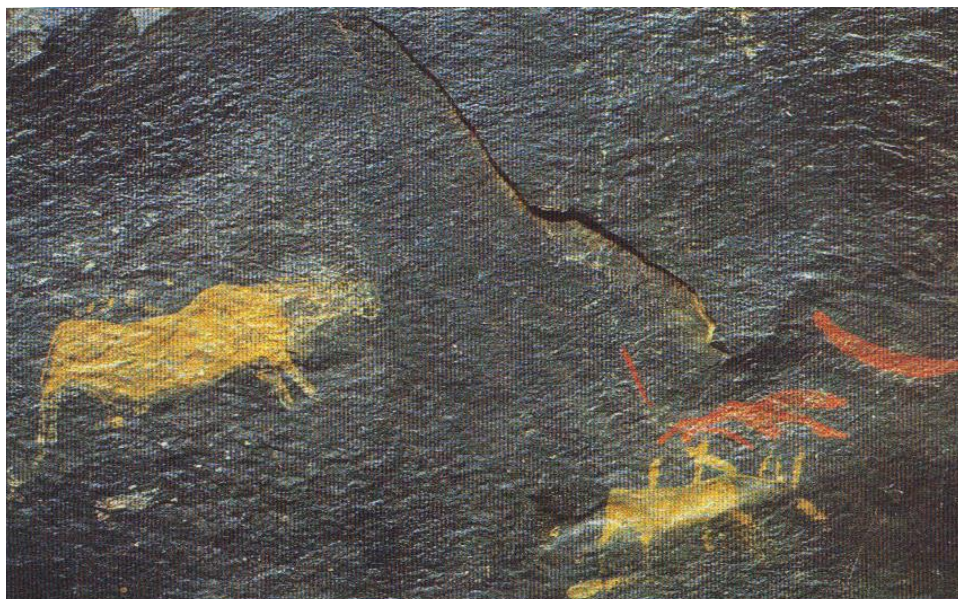


Figure 2



Figure 3

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